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Corresponding Author	Family Name	Villari
	Particle	
	Given Name	Beatrice
	Prefix	
	Suffix	
	Role	
	Division	Design Department
	Organization	Politecnico Di Milano
	Address	Milan, Italy
	Email	beatrice.villari@polimi.it
Abstract	This chapter discusses the importance of proximity in the growing trend among cities to adopt regenerative models that prioritise sustainability, inclusion, and participation. Collaborative and participatory practices have emerged as critical mechanisms for promoting well-being and prosperity in urban communities. Social innovations are often driven by local communities that can mobilise resources and expertise, helping to steer projects from ideation to realisation, and creating value for the city. Drawing on three case studies targeting different communities, this chapter emphasises proximity as an agent of change, capable of supporting regenerative and relational models that can transform and regenerate services and initiatives at the urban scale. This work underscores the essential role that individuals, communities and places play in advancing participatory and collaborative design practices that prioritise the well-being and prosperity of urban residents.	
Keywords (separated by '-')	Participatory practices - Design communities - Regenerative city models - Sustainability - Well-being	

Generative City and Generative Communities



Beatrice Villari

Abstract This chapter discusses the importance of proximity in the growing trend among cities to adopt regenerative models that prioritise sustainability, inclusion, and participation. Collaborative and participatory practices have emerged as critical mechanisms for promoting well-being and prosperity in urban communities. Social innovations are often driven by local communities that can mobilise resources and expertise, helping to steer projects from ideation to realisation, and creating value for the city. Drawing on three case studies targeting different communities, this chapter emphasises proximity as an agent of change, capable of supporting regenerative and relational models that can transform and regenerate services and initiatives at the urban scale. This work underscores the essential role that individuals, communities and places play in advancing participatory and collaborative design practices that prioritise the well-being and prosperity of urban residents.

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1 Generative Cities: Participative, Inclusive, and Sustainable Communities

In recent years, issues related to the ecological crisis, sustainability, economic model crises, and social cohesion have taken centre stage on the European political agenda (Farrel and Thirion 2000; OECD 2001). To support a sustainable transition and reduce inequalities between different European contexts, one strategy has been to implement strong bottom-up local development policies. In those years, the European Commission promoted the concept of territorial innovation as integrated development (Farrel and Thirion 2000) to address urgent environmental problems, enhance local and cultural identities, and reduce the socio-economic gap between regions.

B. Villari (✉)
Design Department, Politecnico Di Milano, Milan, Italy
e-mail: beatrice.villari@polimi.it

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Many European cities have embraced the principles of sustainability, inclusion, and participation in their political agenda. There has been a growing trend of showcasing sustainable and low-energy solutions, transportation networks, and technological implementations that evolve around "smart cities". Concurrently, numerous established cities are facing challenges such as rapid urbanisation, aging infrastructure, limited finance, and increasing inequality, leading them to look for ways to retrofit, modernise, or upgrade different districts to enhance their liveability and competitiveness.

For example, Helsinki has included the circular economy processes into its policies, supporting regenerative models of resources while enabling a participatory and inclusive approach (City of Helsinki 2022). Similarly, Amsterdam has implemented a strategy that involves citizens in numerous initiatives related to recycling and reuse processes at the neighbourhood level (Amsterdam Circular 2020–2025 Strategy 2022). Milan has developed a resilient strategy to tackle environmental, social, and economic challenges through collaborative actions involving citizens and policymakers adopting co-design practices and supporting wider citizen participation. These models pay attention to people considered as knowledge agents, namely active stakeholders able to support transformative practices towards more sustainable, resilient, and inclusive cities. This also happens by enabling people's creative potential and adopting collaborative and participatory strategies to improve quality of life and well-being (Romanelli 2022).

Recently, the European Commission proposed the 'human-centred city' model through which "citizens become city-makers and shapers, architects and co-creators of their own evolving urban development" (European Commission 2019, pp. 12–13), considering co-design and co-creation as enablers of innovation, beyond technology or market-led models. More emphasis is given to needs, expectations, and lifestyles as drivers for innovation at the local level. The role of citizens is then changed: from being informed to being an active stakeholder, no longer considered a 'target' of top-down decision-making processes. In the city context, this also implies that solutions outlined—from policy and programme to services—include the ability of organisations and individuals to participate with an active role in creating, delivering and maintaining such solutions, thus creating social value and social capital. Similarly, the European Green Deal (European Commission 2023) promotes the importance of putting citizens at the centre of the initiatives in an explicit matter. Within this programme, the transition towards sustainability must be just and inclusive, putting people first and paying attention to the regions, industries, and workers (Ibid). To ensure the growth and development of future cities, social inclusion must be a critical foundation, incorporating three key components: spatial inclusion (providing affordable housing, water, and sanitation); social inclusion (ensuring equal rights and participation); and economic inclusion (generating employment opportunities and offering citizens avenues for economic advancement) (World Bank 2023).

2 Innovation Spaces and Design Communities

The attention given to local and territorial issues as design objects is relatively recent and is part of the disciplinary reflections that theorise the expansion of disciplinary boundaries whereby design deals not only with products, but also with experiences, services and systems, up to governments and societal transformations (Buchanan 2001). Therefore, territories become a design object, through an approach that is by nature holistic, strategic, and systemic and in which complexity is part of the context in which we live and operate (Liem 2012; Sevaldson 2010; Valtonen 2010). This perspective involves widening the design boundaries: from designing for a single company and the final users, we move on to designing for and with local communities, for business systems up to relating to complex systems such as forms of governance and policymaking.

In the design field, the interest in territorial development is often linked with social innovation with a growing attention towards smaller-scale spaces and initiatives (Manzini 2010). Territorial issues thus became connected to strategic design, service design, and design for social innovation (Manzini and Meroni 2014; Parente and Sedini 2017; Villari 2012). In particular, collaborative practices and participatory models have been explored to support well-being and prosperity for people and places (Manzini 2015). Reasoning from a human-centred approach and enhancing the local capital means taking into consideration contextual factors that favour the creation or strengthening of local innovation. Hence, the role of the communities (considered both as beneficiaries and promoters/designers of the interventions) is crucial and could be defined as “loci and drivers of social innovation” (Moulaert 2010).

In cities, there are emerging practices and processes of innovation that combine bottom-up trajectories and top-down strategies. These take shape in hybrid spaces of innovation that can be physical or virtual, formal or informal environments designed to encourage creativity, collaboration, and experimentation. These soft or hard infrastructures are intended to provide a platform for collaboration for citizens, entrepreneurs, policymakers and researchers to work together, generate new ideas, and develop innovative solutions to social, environmental, and economic challenges facing the cities. Such generative environments enable, for example, public and private initiatives in which different stakeholders can work together on different issues, i.e., traffic congestion, air pollution, inclusivity for women, or homelessness. These arenas of innovation are often fueled by creative communities (Jegou and Manzini 2008), design communities (Fassi and Manzini 2022; Villari 2021), and communities of practice—entities capable of aggregating resources and expertise and accompanying processes from ideation to realisation, creating value for the entire territory as well as for individuals and organisations.

Designing at the city scale requires systems thinking and the capacity to play different roles to facilitate, enable, trigger processes, collaborate with different stakeholders, build collective capacity, and envision future scenarios and open forms of collaboration (Tan 2012; Malpass and Salinas 2020; Villari 2022). Communities

contribute in different ways to the transformation process. Villari (2021) describes four scenarios that depicts the different roles designers and communities might have in local development. These are:

- *Design by communities* refers to activities that are autonomously promoted by communities, where the contribution of design is not explicit or formalised. Instead, specific groups of people organise and implement initiatives that generate value for the territorial capital through mainly self-promoted practices.
- *Design with communities* involves designers, laypersons, and end-users collaborating to co-design or co-create solutions that generate value for a specific local context or social group. This scenario utilises specific design tools such as co-design workshops and collaborative prototyping, and involves different skills, knowledge, and competencies in formalised processes throughout the design journey.
- *Design for communities* is guided by a clear design strategy aimed at enhancing a specific community, such as children, entrepreneurs, migrants, or students. These communities are the direct beneficiaries of the design intervention, and their growth and improvement generate value for the territory and environment, supporting economic, social, and environmental development through an explicit design-driven approach.
- *Design of community* refers to situations where a community is at the beginning of its formation, with blurred boundaries and loose and informal relationships and structures. In this scenario, community initiatives are often in the embryonic stage, and the explicit role of design may not be immediately recognisable. This scenario does not describe formal steps and tools for starting and cultivating a community, but instead describes the stage from which various bottom-up/top-down initiatives may arise.

The following paragraph briefly describes three initiatives based on the valorisation of specific communities, through various models of urban regeneration. These models range from enhancing individual capacities (Piano C) to building awareness and design capabilities (Genitori Antismog), and constructing collaborative and bottom-up services capable of generating value for the entire community of citizens (Massamarmocchi).

3 Regenerative Solutions for Cities: Recognising Communities' Hidden Needs

3.1 Piano C: A Community to Support Women's Talent

Piano C was founded in Milan as a co-working space for working mothers, with the aim of reconciling their parental responsibilities with their work commitments. Initially, this environment provided equipped spaces and specialised skills to allow

mothers to bring their children to work. Over the years, Piano C has transformed into a centre of attraction for talent and entrepreneurship, always focused on the enhancement of female talent, which is to be recognised and cultivated. The themes it addresses concern the creation of a more equitable and inclusive society, the empowerment of participation, and the awareness of the role of women in the world of work.

Since 2012, Piano C has focused on professional redesign, training, and female empowerment through training courses, workshops, and events, where specific tools are shared to enhance skills and focus on business objectives. This is in addition to a process of female empowerment that includes awareness-raising actions, advocacy campaigns, and consultancy interventions for companies and social entities.

After the pandemic, Piano C recognised the greater need for new models capable of innovating the world of work, and introducing new forms of organisation and female leadership able to bring value to the job system. Over the years, Piano C has reached many women by listening to their stories to identify and recognise talents and skills that are often unexpressed. This has led to the creation of a community of women who recognise themselves in the proposed model and in the vision of change.

In particular, Piano C has developed its own design method that combines design thinking, storytelling, and empowerment techniques to strengthen awareness of one's own value and present oneself at one's best as a worker and professional. The process aims to strengthen awareness of one's own value and to acquire useful skills for workers and professionals, identifying a working dimension that reflects the aspirations, desires, and ambitions related to one's own talent. The vision is that the right job is the one that can form a synergy between professional and personal skills, integrating life and work projects. The path is aimed at a female community that needs to redesign their professional careers, also through comparison between similar stories and group work. Project ideas and aspirations are shared, focused, and compared with similar examples and innovations, to arrive at a prototype that can then be tested.

3.2 Genitori Antismog Milano: A Community to Foster Sustainable and Inclusive Behaviours

The history of the "Genitori Antismog" association in Milan began in 2001, when the local administration suggested that mothers keep their children at home due to the environmental emergency caused by smog. This initiative provoked a protest by Milanese mothers, who gathered under Palazzo Marino with empty strollers to show how the city had been reduced to a place for cars rather than people.

After this protest, a spontaneous committee was formed, which in 2006 became the "Genitori Antismog" (No-smog Parents) association. The term *parents* is used in an inclusive sense, because children are considered as a heritage of the whole community, and their health is everyone's responsibility. Over the years, the association has supported many initiatives to improve the environmental conditions of the city, raise

public awareness, and urge institutions to make the city more livable, breathable, and human-centred. They have acted on various fronts, including legal, educational, and outreach. Numerous projects have been implemented targeting different city users: “Siamo nati per camminare” (We are born to walk) dedicated to children; “Mobility Manager” courses targeted at teachers; “Negozio amici dell’Aria” (Friends of the Air Shops) a network dedicated to shopkeepers; and “TréntaMI” (Zone 30 trials) focused on citizens and local residents.

Being “Antismog” means fighting against air pollution and traffic, which damage people’s health and quality of life. “Genitori Antismog” works to support sustainable and inclusive initiatives regarding mobility, pollution, quality of life, commerce, and child-friendly cities.

Regarding mobility, the focus is on sustainable mobility, which allows people to move efficiently without damaging the environment. This involves reducing traffic in cities, creating integrated transport systems, and promoting alternative means of transportation to decrease air pollution. Air pollutants, such as fine particulate matter, nitrogen oxides, and ground-level ozone, are highly harmful to health and must be drastically reduced to improve air quality, prevent diseases, and promote urban well-being.

The issue of public space is also a critical area to support collaborative solutions, as the quality of life is closely linked to the quality of the urban environment. Congested, polluted, and noisy cities are less livable, and promoting alternative means of transportation, requalifying public space, and recovering urban greenery can help improve the quality of life in cities.

Another issue that “Genitori Antismog” address is that of local commerce, which is considered an essential element in the vitality of cities. Supporting neighbourhood shops, which play a key role in the local community, can contribute to the creation of a solid social fabric and the economic growth of residential areas.

Finally, the association promotes an inclusive idea of the city through the “city of children” initiative, which considers the needs of children in urban planning and mobility design, among other services. Designing safe and livable public spaces for children can improve the quality of life for families and the local community, therefore generating paths of change at the local level that can create value for the community, organisations, and institutions.

3.3 Massa Marmocchi: A Grassroot Initiative to Support Sustainable Mobility for Children and Families

Massa Marmocchi Milano is a non-profit volunteer organisation based in Milan. It consists of a group of Milanese parents who organise themselves to bring their children to school by bicycle, assisted by volunteers. The project started when a mother requested the help of the Milanese Critical Mass movement to accompany parents and children who ride their bikes to school and support them during the

journey. This first initiative then spread thanks to the enthusiasm of other parents and the colourful and cheerful participation of dozens of activists, who were experts in safely managing bicycle traffic among motor traffic. They belong to the national coordination, Bike to School, which, together with other communities from Bologna, Genoa, Naples, Rome, and Turin, organises national ‘bike to school’ days that have become popular over the years. Currently, the initiative has become established to the extent that parents pedal with the children every week to Milanese schools where a Massa Marmocchi has been organised.

The community has grown significantly, and in 2019 Massa Marmocchi Milano was a recipient of the Ambrogino d’Oro, the highest social recognition from the City of Milan. Since September 2021, they are also ambassadors of the Climate Investment Funds ChangeMakers campaign in support of the Conference of Parties 26 (COP26) for climate change.

Recently, they launched the “Marmocchi Toolkit | Il manuale delle Giovani Marmocchie”, created adopting a collaborative process thanks to the involvement of a service designer and volunteers. The toolkit is designed to provide a tangible contribution to the development and increase of cycling trips between homes and primary schools, which can play a fundamental role in the field of school mobility and beyond. It was developed through a participatory approach based on listening and enhancing the point of view of all stakeholders, which can support other groups of parents (and schools) in the future development of other Massa Marmocchi cycling routes. Every year, in fact, the association receives new requests, which it is not always possible to accommodate. The collaborative process aims to involve different categories of stakeholders: primary school students and their families, parent associations/committees, teachers and school principals. In particular, the Massa Marmocchi Association has identified four comprehensive institutes and five Milanese primary schools: Tre Castelli (zone 6), Pietro Micca, Rinnovata and Dante Alighieri (zone 8) and Monte Velino (zone 4). It is already active in the first two, while the others are schools in which groups of parents have expressed the desire to activate the initiative. In this way, the activity is expanding, generating collaboration between schools and citizens, and creating awareness about the importance of providing safe bike paths for citizens, as well as strengthening the social bond between local communities.

4 Regenerating Relational Proximity

In the described models of urban regeneration, the construction of stable and trust-based relationships is a fundamental element. Relational proximity is a mechanism that enables innovation processes based on the construction of relationships between individuals, communities, and diverse skills. In this scenario, the empathic dimension is a lever to trigger processes of change both within organisations and in the relationship with communities (D’Alena 2021; Villari 2021). D’Alena (2021) describes the relationship between institutions and citizens through the role of *proximity agents* who coordinate and fuel relationships with the urban fabric.

This concept can certainly be adapted in a project context, as those actors capable of connecting, and facilitating collaboration. In the Piano C experience, proximity agents are represented by members of the community who facilitate the valorisation of female talent. In Genitori Antismog, they are those who generate activism, amplifying the message of sustainable practices throughout the urban fabric. In the case of Massamarmocchi, they are the figures that create new connections with other neighbourhoods and schools, enabling dialogue and expanding mobilisation. This causes the strengthening of relationships, and human and social capital, which are manifested through more or less formalised practices and tools, and through involvement models that start from the recognition of latent, hidden needs, which are often poorly perceived by institutions and formal infrastructures.

These regenerative models often lead to the construction of new languages and new models, and therefore manifest themselves through practices capable of changing the system rather than adapting to it. Piano C is based on the idea of reconciling work and family life by offering a welfare system that the city was not prepared ready to offer. Genitori Antismog have had a positive impact on citizens' behaviours, highlighting the criticalities of the current urban mobility system, and emphasising how moving around the city sustainably and (even slowly) can also generate new public spaces. Massamarmocchi, in a sense, has hacked the system, making space where there was no space, and putting at the centre the mobility, safety, and quality of life needs that fragile communities, such as children, have.

These are forms of social innovation in which the role of individuals and communities is central to enable participatory, collaborative, and relational forms of design. Mortati and Villari (2013) describe participation, collaboration, and networking as essential skills for designers dealing with social innovation challenges. Collaboration involves the skill of creatively connecting with various actors to negotiate solutions, leveraging collective creativity, and considering people's needs. Participation involves empowering stakeholders by engaging citizens in the learning process, encouraging them to become active players in the process, and creating social sharing platforms. Networking emphasises the importance of systemic thinking to create a cohesive experience across all the material and non-material aspects of a solution. Citizen engagement and empowerment are some of the keys to read the connection between design and social innovation. Solutions and tools are proposed to enhance citizens' capacity to act on the place they inhabit. This is a privileged means to generate social change, and it is the core of transformative practices led by design.

Adopting Manzini's perspective through which everybody designs (Manzini 2015), people and communities have an active role in the design, production, and distribution of goods and services (Cottam and Leadbeater 2004; Botsman and Rogers 2010), becoming agents of change (Bovaird 2007; Lukensmeyer 2007).

In this transformative process, proximity plays a critical role in reshaping and regenerating services for cities, recognising the importance of weak and strong ties, of active listening, and the 'power of we'. It is about improving accessibility to services and infrastructure, increasing efficiency, reducing costs, shortening waiting times, and improving the overall quality of services. Proximity can also facilitate innovation and creativity. When different organisations and individuals are located

in close proximity to each other, they are more likely to collaborate and share ideas. This can lead to the development of new services, products, and technologies, which benefit the community as a whole, improve the quality of life for all, and contribute to the overall development and success of the community.

5 A Regenerated City

5.1 Scenario 01

In the city of Milan, a group of residents decided to take a different approach to place-making, planning and designing services. The group started by organising community actions where people could share their ideas and concerns about the city. They listened carefully to what people had to say and created a map of the hidden needs that were often overlooked by traditional planning methods and policymakers.

Envisioning a new model to support growth, prosperity, sustainability, and inclusion, they were called *agents of change*. They began to collaborate with other citizens, families, local businesses and organisations to regenerate services, places, interactions, and the community itself. They focused on creating environments where women could work in a comfortable place their children would be taken care of. They also designed bike-friendly routes for children and families, fostering sustainable mobility to have fresh air to breathe, and regenerating public spaces at the same time.

One of the key aspects of the *agents of change* was considering proximity as a transformative lever. As a result, they worked to create more inclusive communities and spaces, and innovation arenas where they could spark ideas and make them real, while creating a sense of pride among the local community. Over time, Milan became more and more a sustainable, inclusive, vibrant and thriving city that was able to regenerate solutions that truly belonged to its people and its values (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Scenario 01: a regenerated city

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